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## South European Populism as a Consequence of the Multidimensional Crisis? The Cases of SYRIZA, PODEMOS and M5S

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### Abstract

The occurrence of the financial crisis in Europe has offered enough space for the growth of populist alternatives in the public speech. Thus, the aim of this study is to connect the socio-economic consequences of the crisis with the populist rhetoric of SYRIZA (Radical Left Coalition), M5S (5 Star Movement) and PODEMOS (We Can) parties in Greece, Italy and Spain respectively. A comparative analysis will be conducted in order to identify their main characteristics as well as the differences and the commonalities of the three cases. Taking into account as analytical tools, the specificities of the South European area and the old and new theories of populism, this paper aims to offer lucrative incentives to the scientific discussion about the rise of populism in this region.

**Keywords:** populism, crisis, welfare, South European periphery



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## 1. Introductory and Theoretical Remarks

After the outbreak of the recent economic crisis in Europe, the foundations of the traditional political structure were shaken, creating new upheavals in terms of political representation. On the one hand, the continuation of austerity measures implementation and on the other, the increasing migratory flows, are two of the most important challenges for European governments, particularly in Southern Europe, which is facing the greatest pressures. Another crucial parameter is the fact that the continuing negative social impact of the crisis has reduced the capacity and ability of the social-democratic parties to manage the pressures, thus resulting in their disruption, recently characterized as *pasokification*<sup>1</sup>, and in the general questioning of the existing political system and of the European institutions by the populist parties, that are constantly increasing their popularity (Langurashvili, 2016). At the same time, it should be mentioned that the crisis in Southern Europe is a basic consequence of both structural dysfunctions at the European Union (EU) and Eurozone level, characterized by a serious lack of democratic legitimacy, as well as structural existing internal malformations that dominate the South European model of capitalism and prosperity which is also characterized by ambiguity (Hall and Soskice, 2001). These factors are directly related to the subsequent rise of populism in these countries, which challenge the political status quo and creates both internal and external “enemies” in order to attract more voters. As it will be analyzed, as long as the socio-economic problems increase or remain in high levels, the influence of populist parties is growing. Furthermore, as it will also be analysed, in Southern Europe there is a growth of a new kind of populism which has been an outcome of the crisis, it has determined its content through the effects of the crisis and thus, it corresponds to the basic origins of the distinction between privileged and non-privileged.

Before proceeding to the basic analysis of this kind of populism it is essential to distinguish its common, general, and fundamental characteristics. It turns out that there are various views on this issue but three key components are common for all populist parties, whether of the left or of the right of the political spectrum. Ideologically, they can rely on some specific values, but they are characterized by a simplification of the stated-proposed policies with references to the “people” as a whole or a mass, with common characteristics and radically differentiated by the elites, with which they are in constant confrontation, while it consists of ideological references which are often regenerated, vague, reversed and used as needed. Actually, populism substitutes the traditional class differentiation and refers to the people without distinguishing them from the mass.

Therefore:

- (1) the ideology of these parties acquires a superficial character (Mudde, 2004),
- (2) there is a gap of substantive practical content with a tension to simplification (Laclau, 2005), as long as their populist speech generalizes in a regular manner, unwitting the real-practical problems while its vagueness corresponds to the emotions rather than to the real issues, and,
- (3) there is a focus on references to people as an indeterminate mass which is opposite to the elites and the status quo (Mény & Surel, 2002).

It turns out that, as a political speech, populism applies to the collective beliefs and to the indefinite expectations of the human emotions (Durkheim, 1994), creating a crucial gap with the realistic policy. The

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<sup>1</sup> PASOK (Panhellenic Socialistic Movement) is the social democratic party in Greece that was one of the major governmental parties after the restoration of democracy and until the crisis. In the 2012 and 2015 national elections its percentages dropped from about 40% of the total votes to 12% and 6% respectively. Its electoral shrinkage is called “pasokification”, which is a concept that derives from its name and it is often used to describe the decline of social democracy in several European countries (Cuperus, 2018).

main objective of these characteristics is to create external and internal enemies, who are against the people in order to enhance the populists as the ultimate defenders of the people.

Populists become exponents of the crowd, emulate the concept of people with the concept of mass and they are strongly based on the appearance, namely on the political communication. Thus, the populist parties include in their speech the expectations of the mass for the resolution of their problems but in fact they aim at satisfying their basic intention, namely, to gain political power and finally, to govern.

Under these circumstances, and based on the abovementioned, some of these parties express clear concerns about democratic legitimacy deficits in modern national and supranational institutions as well as about the negative effects of the policies of neoliberalism and globalization, which are constantly accused as violators of human dignity, as a strategy to attract the leftist electoral audience. Other populist political parties, especially of the right-wing direction, focus on criticism of the rise of migratory flows in Europe, and often link them with conspiratorial references to upper plans of the cosmopolitan elites to which the people should oppose. These two opposing sides, however, are often characterized by unclear boundaries as some parties, such as the M5S in Italy, are concerned by issues from both sides (right, and left). However, the basic characteristic of all populists is exactly that they express attitudes and views that are often unstable and can be differentiated according to the circumstances. Therefore, the central pillar of these attitudes is the effort to distance themselves from traditional party formations through an anti-establishment rhetoric (Barr, 2009; Kriesi & Pappas, 2015) which seems to represent the interests of a “vague” mass, in general, of the people.

Some scholars, such as Gidron and Bonikowski (2013), focus on studying the rise of far-right populism in Europe as the most important current phenomenon, while analyzing at the same time the underlying socio-economic components of voters of these parties (Ackerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014; Hawkins, Riding, & Mudde, 2012). However, emerging populism in Southern Europe seems to gather additional distinct features that also derive from the different inherent elements in the South European model of capitalism and prosperity. Consequently, the study of these distinct elements of populism in Greece, Italy and Spain as expressed by SYRIZA, M5S and PODEMOS respectively, is the ultimate objective of this study in order to identify their connection with the growing negative socio-economic impact of the crisis, the decline of the electoral influence of the Social Democratic parties and the distinct elements of the South European model of prosperity that together contributed to the rise of a peculiar South European or Mediterranean populism (Mavrozacharakis, Kotroyannos & Tzagkarakis, 2017).

## **2. The Mediterranean Welfare Area and the Crisis. A Field of Structural efficiencies and Austerity which Enhanced Populism**

The Southern European model of welfare and its structural deficiencies

The economic crisis is the factor that has created multidimensional implications in Southern Europe. But before we specifically address the economic crisis and its implications for this particular region, which have been a key factor for the rise of populism, we will be concerned with the question of whether Southern Europe constitutes a particular area that shares common elements which also comprise factors that determined the rise of a distinct model of populism.

On the basis of these distinctive features, during the 1990s, the first considerations were made (Castles, 1993; Leibfried, 1992), which indicated the existence of a distinct South European model of welfare (Ferrera, 1996; Rhodes, 1996). A key argument for accepting this model was the fact that although there has been a convergence in the trend of social funding levels since the 1980s, internal peculiarities and international and supranational conditions have continued to play a decisive role in sustaining

economic and institutionalized social policies (Marinakou, 1996) as well as resistance to the implementation of reforms in public administration, the economy and the labour market. At the same time, it should be mentioned that populism, and especially left-wing populism, constituted a key element of the political systems in Southern Europe, which was also a key factor for its strengthening during the crisis.

For some scholars, this peculiar institutional structure of the South European states is a result of political-ideological polarizations and pressures especially from the left parties (Diamandouros, 1994; Watson, 2008). These pressures while supporting theoretically universal ideals did not result in the creation of a comprehensive welfare state and public sector which will effectively protect the whole society from social risks and enhance competitiveness and socio-economic development. Specifically, on the one side, they pressed for the creation of a social security system with high levels of protection, for the establishment of a universal health care system and for the maintenance of the public enterprises which provide public goods to the whole society. But on the other side, they retained a system in which social benefits-transfers distribution followed the fragmented structure of the labour market (Ferrera, 2007; 2010), including strong protections of the core sector, and in order not to experience electoral and political negative effects, they supported and were based on an often particularistic, but rather weak subsidization for the marginal employees (Ferrera, 2010). Extended informal and black economy, fragmented and underdeveloped social services, weak safety-nets, fragmented labour market (Ferrera, 2010), tax evasion and low administration efficiency due to clientelism and low capacities of the public sector, created enormous obstacles to the necessary reforms in order to create an efficient and rational state (Arriba & Moreno, 2005). This institutional deficiency can be easily proved by the existence of few means-tested benefits and the low capacity or lack (Greece) of safety-nets. Under these circumstances, poverty rates were traditionally higher in compare with other European states and were further increased during the years of the financial crisis (Eurostat, 2017; Matsaganis et al. 2003; Petmezidou & Papatheodorou, 2006), elaborating social pressures for changes in the main political directives and transformations to the electoral preferences.

Therefore, it is clear that the South European states did not reach the development level of the North and Central European due to various historical, political, economic and social reasons. The main consequence of this was that there was an unequal development of the state – and its welfare services – and its economic features that addressed only a part of the social problems and maintained the basic inefficiencies and inequalities. This is one of the basic parameters which explains the unequal development in the Eurozone framework. At the same time, although the demand for further social policy interventions as well as the late democratisation kept the left-wing tradition in Southern Europe relatively strong and the lack of fundamental modern public institutions increased the difficulties for a rapid and successful state building.

### **2.1 The Eurozone Crisis and Its Impact on Southern Europe**

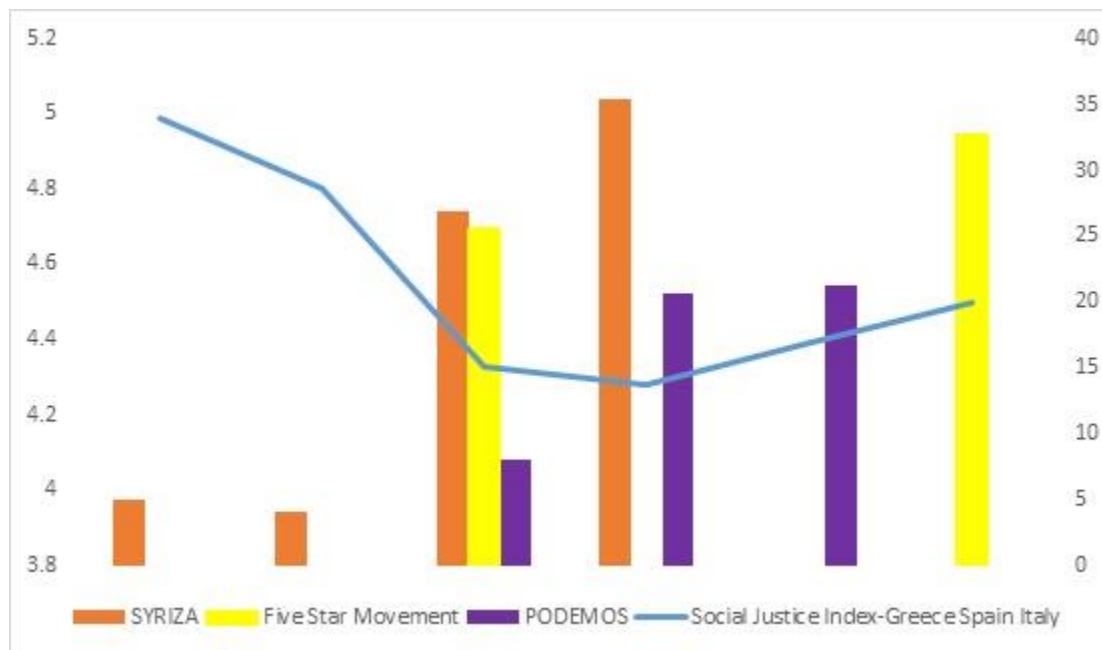
The outcomes of these common issues - in the complex and multifaceted context of the Eurozone crisis and the general externalities - led to significant similarities in the social and economic effects of the crisis, despite several crucial differences. The common socio-economic issues that the region face, have also led to similar directions and dysfunctions in the institutional structure, with the overriding need to address similar pressures in the current crisis. As a result, the southern European states on the one hand found themselves under economic pressure due to the economic imbalances, and on the other, the public sector in general and the cost of its maintenance were treated as key factors of economic instability and a dismantling process deemed necessary but did not necessarily improved efficiency. The extreme impact of this trend, including both inherent undermining weaknesses and exogenous increasing pressures, was to increase social difficulties, to undermine the welfare state as an institution to strengthen social cohesion

through solidarity, to implement an internal depreciation-devaluation of social capital and, in general, of the productive system, which led to high levels of social exclusion, poverty and social inequality (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2017; European Commission, 2014; Social Europe, 2017). Consequently, taking into account the common problems that these countries encountered during the crisis, it is clear - in spite of any sub-categorization - that the common characteristics of the area are determined, which is precisely the reason that it is yet studied as an existing and distinct field.

At the same time, it should be noted that the Eurozone is a system which has intrinsic peculiarities, as it constitutes a monetary union, but political unification has not been promoted proportionately. It is therefore consequent to restrict the implementation of national and regional public policies, since they are - indirectly or directly - dependent on the single monetary policy, which defines much of the budgetary policy priorities without the need for fiscal consolidation. In addition, the dominant political doctrine that defines the policies and the general guidelines, is more focused on restrictive policies aimed at reducing the role of the state, even in areas of major importance, while at the same time, it promotes several decisions taken at the technocratic level and imposed to the member states with financial problems, such as the South European. These policy pressures lead to the reduction of the scope for democratic legitimacy of the implemented policies and at the same time, to the disruption of the institutional spheres of social and economic security (Patomäki, 2013). An additional very important element that has not been addressed by the common market is the emergence of increasing socio-economic imbalances and inequalities arising from the different levels of productive activities among Member States (Beck, 2013), which affect regional policy and create imbalances both at national and regional level.

At the same time, the limited inclusion of the social factor in terms of implementing a plan in order to enhance a “more social Europe” does not allow the development of policy orientations that, from the outset, will direct national and regional governments to address social problems. These weaknesses have led to the implementation of extensive austerity measures in southern European countries, particularly in those that have been included in fiscal adjustment memoranda, such as Greece. Austerity measures and restrictive policies have led to an increase in the influence of populist parties that have been opposed to austerity and to the EU. A large part of the electorate, plagued by social problems and disappointed mainly by traditional social democratic parties, has found an electoral resort to the populist promises of SYRIZA, M5S and PODEMOS, which have gradually increased their electoral percentages based on their populist and relatively unrealistic promises and their radical agenda (see Figure 1). Therefore, the technocratic speech that the European institutions used in order to confront and finally resolve the crisis problems did not achieve either to resolve the problems or to convince the people for the necessary policies.





Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung (2017), Ministries of Interior of Greece, Italy and Spain, own calculations<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1.

Social Justice Index and electoral rise of SYRIZA, Podemos and Five Star Movement 2009-2018

The uneven growth of the Eurozone and the core-periphery division<sup>3</sup> offered enormous political space for the - often irresponsible and dangerous - populists, as they found the opportunity to develop in their political speech, internal and external “enemies”, which is a basic populist strategy in order to grow electorally. Moreover, the democratic deficit of the European institutions was one of the main arguments of criticism by the populists which is not yet addressed practically. Thus, the crisis has been the driving force which seduced the crowd and it was purposely used by populists in Southern Europe in order to gain political power.

### 3. Comparative analysis of the electoral success and main populist features of SYRIZA, PODEMOS and M5S during the crisis

#### 3.1 The case of SYRIZA in Greece

Starting with SYRIZA, it should be mentioned that the party was formed as an electoral alliance of leftist parties and organizations in 2004, but its starting point can be found decades earlier (Nikolakakis,

<sup>2</sup> It turns out that when the social justice index as Bertelsman Stiftung (2017) has calculated, decreases, the percentages of the populist parties dramatically increase.

<sup>3</sup> From the outset of the crisis, the core countries of the Eurozone show positive current account surplus, high levels of competitiveness and development, as well as low levels of inequality and unemployment while the peripheral countries – mainly the South European – show low levels of competitiveness and development, high unemployment, poverty and inequality and negative current account surplus (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2017; Eurofound, 2017; Social Europe, 2017).

2016). A common source of many leftist parties is the Communist Party (KKE). During the Civil War (1946-1949) the Communist Left forces formed the Democratic Army of Greece and were opposed to the governmental forces. The Civil War was finished in 1949 with the defeat of the Communist forces and commenced a long period of exile and persecution for the Communists until 1974 (Woodhouse, 2002). After the fall of the dictatorship in 1974 and its recognition by Constantine Karamanlis, KKE constituted a coalition after the United Democratic Left and the KKE of the Interior and received 9.4% in the national elections. The main motto was the word "Change", which is not absent from the current SYRIZA rhetoric and was also used by the Social Democratic party (PASOK) during the first governmental period in 1980s (Pappas & Dimari, 2018). From 1989 to 1991, a period of divisions and various movements started for the radical left that believed in the renewal of its ideology. In 2001, the effort to create a "Dialogue Area for Unity and Joint Action of the Left" was launched, bringing together all the progressive forces (Dialogue Press Conference). Actually, this is considered as the starting point of SYRIZA and the mobilizations that opposed various reforms radicalized it through a utopian and populist speech. As a result, the first single ballot paper entitled "Coalition of the Radical Left - Union Letter of Votes" was obtained, taking 3.3% in the national elections of 2004 (BBC, 2004).

In 2009 there was the last electoral process that austerity existed only as a theoretical concept and not as an implemented policy that had affected society. Thus, PASOK and George Papandreou won the elections using a rhetoric for a policy that would lead the country to a path in which it could overpass the financial crisis that was at its starting point (Aslanidis & Kaltwasser, 2016). The 2012 elections were conducted when the memoranda with European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund have already entered the daily life in Greece and SYRIZA, through its populist rhetoric, become a genuine expresser of the anti-memorandum political bloc which, when taking power, was regularly promising to abolish the memorandum through "a law and an article" (Katsambekis, 2016; Tsipras, 2014). It is still the first electoral process in which the two traditional dominant parties after the dictatorship (1974 onwards) in Greece failed to secure a governmental majority, with PASOK even seeing its percentages collapsing (Vasilopoulou & Halikiopoulou, 2013). On the way to power, Alexis Tsipras and SYRIZA did not hesitate to use enough tactical tricks to gain electoral influence. Some of his key pre-election promises were (Stoupas, 2015):

- (1) The abolition of property tax (ENFIA) from 2015.
- (2) The re-establishment of the 13th retirement benefit to low-paid pensioners.
- (3) The promotion of measures for the protection of the financially weak Greeks from auctions.
- (4) The reduction of bank debts, which means some sort of horizontal "haircut" of debts.
- (5) The abolition of the memorandum with "an article and a law".
- (6) The nationalization of banks.
- (7) The re-employment of the cleaners of the Ministry of Economics that the previous governments had fired.
- (8) The re-opening of National Television and Radio Broadcast (ERT).
- (9) The restructuring of the procedure for the television channel licenses that continued to exist after 25 years of operation without a clear licensing framework.

The abovementioned proposals are only indicative of a huge number of objectives-promises that SYRIZA abolished after forming the governmental coalition in 2015. From the above indicative promises only the 7th and the 8th were implemented, and the 9th was attempted but in a way that was unconstitutional and was cancelled by the Highest Court of Justice. For all the rest, the government of SYRIZA-ANEL, as a new kind of conformism, has claimed that they were imperatives of the memorandum, which had been agreed by the previous governments and could not be reversed. Essentially, SYRIZA used



the support mechanism (memorandum of understanding with the Troika, namely the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund) as an obvious excuse for the decisions it has taken and it actually assigns the responsibility for them to the “internal” enemies, namely the traditional parties (the establishment) which governed during the previous 30 years.

Regarding the European Union, SYRIZA participated in the elections three times, and only during the 2014 European Parliament elections it managed to be transformed from a marginal party to a relatively important one. Through the 2014 European Parliament elections, a significant part of the European citizens has chosen Euro-sceptic parties in order to show their opposition to the idea of the European unification (Rohrschneider & Whitefield, 2016). SYRIZA was in the opposition that period and its anti-European, anti-establishment rhetoric was imminent (Brack & Startin, 2015) as long as it was appeared as the political party that will reverse the negative social consequences of the implemented austerity measures that the external institutions (EU) along with the internal traditional political parties (PASOK and New Democracy) had imposed.

SYRIZA was broadly accepted as a challenge to neoliberal austerity policies as well as a populist danger for Europe and the European Union (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014). In addition, the view that an electoral victory of SYRIZA would cause intense instability in the European Union and the markets (Featherstone, 2012) has been strongly developed, which was confirmed by the first governmental period (January-July 2015) when Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and the Finance Minister Yianis Varoufakis were systematically making statements against the European Union and the institutions (IMF, ECB), which they considered to be fundamentally opposed to their policies.

SYRIZA's pre-electoral speech and especially Alexis Tsipras speech, frequently included words such as the people, youth, social movements, social structures and “turn to the people” (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014: 127). Moreover, SYRIZA's electoral slogans were heavily emotionally enriched and thus were given a widespread dynamic to the people. In the 2012 national elections, they used the slogans such as “They decided without us”, and “it is either us or them: together we can overthrow them” and in conjunction with the slogans they used in the squares' manifestations: “The Man over profits” and “Another world is feasible”, suggested a clear division for the people, that is, “us or those who have ruled the country for so long”, as a concurrent effort for a strong message to the neo-liberal European Union (Stavrakakis & Katsambekis, 2014: 129). Therefore, SYRIZA seemed to be the party that aimed to overthrow both the Greek and European status quo and to open up new horizons-alternatives for popular sovereignty also for the rest of Europe that was plagued by the economic crisis and the unequal treatment that capitalism enhanced. But after its electoral victory SYRIZA simply tried just to manage the cliental system that had been carefully crafted and survived for years (Vasilopoulou et al. 2013; Pappas, 2014), in order to make even more beneficial the populist way of governance, as a way to remain in power.

### **3.2 The Case of PODEMOS in Spain**

PODEMOS party was the transformation of the “indignados movement” after the massive protests in Spain against austerity in 2011 (Ramiro & Gomez, 2016). It was created 4 months before the European Parliament elections in 2014, which recorded a rate of 7.98% and elected 5 MEPs, thus taking the fourth place among the parties in Spain (Castells, 2015; Cordero & Montero, 2015). In the national elections that followed, PODEMOS almost tripled its percentage and in 2016 it grew to “Unidos Podemos” as it entered an electoral bloc with Izquierda Unida (United Left) (Manetto & De Blass, 2016). It turns out that PODEMOS, such as SYRIZA, broke the bipartization, for the first time after the establishment of democracy in Spain, between the People's Party and the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE-Social Democratic

Party) (Segatti & Capuzzi, 2016). Furthermore, since its creation, PODEMOS has tried to bring together a logic of direct democracy stemming from the networks and the “road conventions”<sup>4</sup> with a hierarchical party structure with a charismatic leader, such as Pablo Iglesias (Kioupkiolis, 2016).

PODEMOS also promoted the demands of popular sovereignty, redistribution of wealth, protection of social rights and political freedoms, thus making it possible to embody the demands of the “indignados” movement (Sampedro & Lobera, 2014). As in the case of SYRIZA, it turns out that PODEMOS is partly responsible for the crisis of political representation by transforming the political speech into a utopian leftist and demagogic (Kioupkiolis, 2016). Therefore, in this case there is a clear transformation of the left-right dipole into a new dipole of privileged and non-privileged, social majority and the favoured elite; something closely to the distinction that SYRIZA promoted in Greece between memorandum and anti-memorandum blocs. Words such as “el pueblo” (the people), “la gente” (the people), “la mayoría social” (the social majority), “la ciudadanía” (the citizenry), were frequently used in Iglesias speeches and share common elements with those of Tsipras (Kioupkiolis, 2016: 103). These words actually represented the vague mass which was suffering from impoverishment and social exclusion and PODEMOS was introduced as the political party which, in contrary with the traditional parties which favoured the elites, would act only for the interests of this vague-underprivileged majority as long as it is not part of the elite (Adagio, 2013). A common enemy was neoliberalism, the conditions that led to its expansion, but also its effects, namely, austerity and social problems that have been exacerbated.

Iglesias urged his voters to think as young Don Quixote’s and resist to the totalitarianism of the financial markets by taking their dreams seriously (Tremlett, 2015). Moreover, the slogan with regard to Europe was “reclaiming Europe” (Marsili & Moruno, 2016), which had a revolutionary meaning aiming at attracting the voters of the declining left-wing parties. Thus, by representing an alternative to the established-traditional parties, PODEMOS actually managed to attract young voters and those who mainly suffered socio-economically (Camas, 2016; Gillespie, 2017), mainly by promising a radical change once taking power.

### **3.3 The Case of M5S in Italy**

Finally, the M5S (Movimento 5 Stelle) differs both ideologically and historically from both the previous analyzed parties. It was created by Beppe Grillo, a comic who satirized both the economic system and the political corruption in Italy. It is a party that has exploited the new technologies and the internet in a way that directly benefited its political influence. This success was reinforced by Gianroberto Casaleggio, who, as a former ICT, had the necessary knowledge in order to elaborate the political influence through new technologies (Biorcio & Natale, 2013).

Since 2005, Grillo’s blog had been among the most influential in the world. M5S was mainly based on Grillo’s influence and not on the public consultation such as in other movements. Moreover, its political speech was focused in seven main pillars, namely, relationship between state and citizens, energy, information, economy, transport, health and education. However, its program was vague and unclear in ideological and practical terms, something which is similar to other European populist parties (Miconi, 2015; Perrazoli, 2013).

In 2010 M5S participated fragmentarily in the elections for the regional administration and it managed to elect several candidates. The turning point is considered to be 2012 when it gained a significant percentage (15%) in the Sicilian regional and municipal elections. In the national elections of

<sup>4</sup> The atypical conventions of the people who participated in movements, which tried to create a notion of direct democracy.

2013, M5S ranked second with 23.79% in the Senate (23.80%) and 25.11% in the Chamber of Deputies (25.60%).

Therefore, Grillo managed to mobilize the people and inspire them while at the same time he totally controlled the party's main strategy (Bordignon & Ceccarini, 2013). Moreover, he managed to express the demand for protection of the national interests that have been undermined by austerity measures. In short, his rhetoric was similar to that of Tsipras and Iglesias, unleashing huge criticism against the European institutions about the financial crisis issue (Giannetti, Pedrazzani & Pinto, 2017), namely against Europe of monopolies and capitalism, but without being part of the narrow limits of left-wing radicalism (Franzosi et al. 2015). Moreover, as in the other two cases, the established political system and the media, were constantly regarded as a single and corrupt entity.

Some of the slogans that Grillo often used were: "Pack your bags!" (referred to MPs), "Admit defeat!", "Every vote counts" (Danna 2013) and called "La Casta" (the upper class) the established traditional political parties and politicians (Tronconi, 2018: 174), as a way to distinguish them as the elite from M5S as a new political alternative which represent the people. Moreover, his former life as a comedian gave him an extraordinary performance advantage as long as he managed to attract the crowds. This is a further factor in characterizing Grillo as a populist leader, as long as he often used offensive expressions and slogans in his speech (Cosenza, 2014), which is a way to distinguish him as the "protector" of peoples' interests.

The electronic election of Luigi Di Maio to party leadership in 2017 marks a turn in the post-Grillo era. Without departing from his populist theoretical background, the party appears to be available in partnerships and to dampen the angles that divide it with traditional or far right-wing parties, such as Lega Nord, just as SYRIZA did with Independent Greeks (ANEL). The recent formation of the coalition with the right-wing populist party Lega Nord, shows that the dangers for Italy are imminent as long as the populist and unclear rhetoric of M5S about the future of the country in the Eurozone have created – and may create in the future - political and economic instability.

#### **4. Synthetic Analysis of the South European Populism: Basic Considerations**

It turns out that there are several common characteristics between the three cases both in structural-institutional and political terms. As it was stated above, the three countries are traditionally characterised by an extended cliental system which actually "trained" its people to demand cliental arrangements from the politicians. But this relation includes the manipulation of the people from the politicians. Therefore, populism easily used this characteristic as long as in such a system the people seem as they want to be manipulated in order to retain the hope of meeting their needs. Furthermore, the three cases are characterized as models of populist parties with a charismatic leader who abolishes the traditional party structures and pretends that there is a direct relationship of the popular leader with the crowd-people

It should be also noted that these populist parties do not ignore the significance of the "national" parameter, but because they want to be presented with general left-wing objections, they limit the national factor in their speech and only in terms of the enemy-friend dipole, namely with the European-international capitalist and neoliberal factors. Under these circumstances, they mostly rely on the launch of a "new" type of policy which counters the corrupt system (establishment), which they denounce. However, this kind of populism is not new, in fact is too old as long as it is the only way to gain power through the reconceptualization of the "public good" which is purely transformed into profit. Thus, although these populists accuse the elites, they actually become a new peculiar "elite", ready to gain political power.

Therefore, populism becomes a kind of political power misappropriation similar to that of the ancient Greek tyrant. Thus, it restricts the liberal conceptualization of civil rights and enhances a general and abstract right of the crowd-mass-people which is contrary to the public good.

Clearly, the starting points of the analyzing parties are different, but they share common subsequent features, such as the criticism on the existing political establishment, on the EU and the promotion of an alternate political direction by appearing as the representative of the people as a whole. It should also be noted that these parties have been characterized by several scholars as radical left-wing parties, regardless of the occasional distinct populist inherent tendencies, mainly from the M5S. Of course, disagreements exist as, for instance, radical agenda in the Marxist theory (Fagerholm, 2016; Wswws, 2015) is considered as the universal overthrow of the capitalist system. On the other hand, it is also considered that the anti-elite, anti-establishment agenda of the particular parties falls within a content of socio-economic change of society and for this reason they can be characterized as radical (Ferraresi, 2016). In this context, some scholars classify SYRIZA and PODEMOS in the group of democratic socialists with an anti-elite, anti-establishment populist rhetoric and M5S in populist parties involving both left-wing and right-wing rhetoric. Surely, if one associates rhetoric with political practice, namely the pre-electoral anti-systemic aggression of the three parties under study, with the post-electoral political implementation of SYRIZA and M5S (as well as the recent tolerance vote from PODEMOS to PSOE government), it may well be said that the populist strategy was only used in order to win the elections. Hence, the theory that populism is characterized by ambiguity of real content exists in the specific cases but has a rather leftist tendency to the pre-electoral era in order to attract the large electoral audience of the collapsing social-democratic parties.

The anti-systemic rhetoric of these parties aimed and succeeded to attract mainly young voters, as they comprise one of the most affected groups by the crisis. It is clear that youth unemployment and youth poverty rates in these countries are among the highest in the Eurozone, causing to the young people feelings of dissatisfaction and discontent which, as reported by various studies (Andreadis, 2016; Itanes, 2013; Orriols and Cordero, 2016), lead them to choose new parties with anti-systemic agenda.

A further key issue is that these populist parties have at several occasions criticized the supranational institutions and accused them of undemocratic methods that reduce the levels of national sovereignty. This is another feature of populism from the particular parties, namely their contradictory relationship with democracy (Mény & Sured, 2002). While on the one hand they appear as “protectors” of democratic institutions, on the other, their harsh rhetoric against the “enemies” they create, normally form societal divisions that are inconsistent with the aim of strengthening democracy and social unity. A striking example is SYRIZA, which had largely divided the Greek society with the decision to conduct a referendum of 2015 on the acceptance or not of the terms of the third memorandum with the Troika (European Central Bank, European Commission, International Monetary Fund), which finally implemented it in its toughest form. On the other hand though, SYRIZA tried to be presented as the protector of the people and democracy (Kotroyannos et al. 2017; Mavrozacharakis, Kotroyannos & Tzagkarakis, 2017). It is precisely this instability that was created in Greece at that time, as well as the difference in words-promises and actions, which became one of the deterrent factors to the rapid rise of PODEMOS in Spain in the 2016 elections.

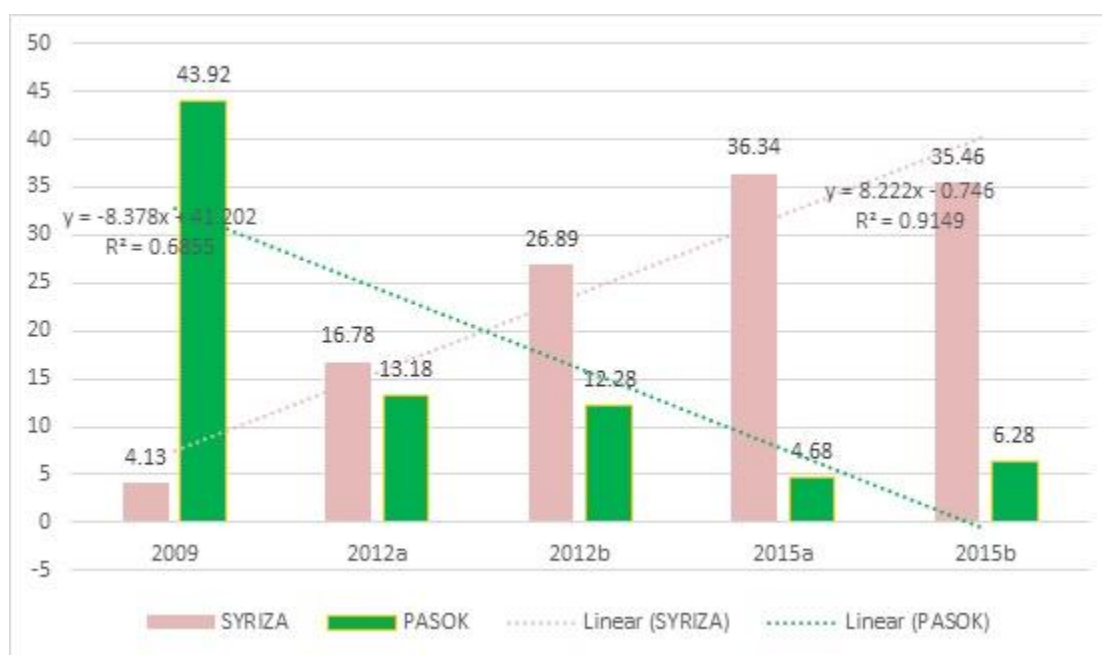
On the other hand, as long as austerity-restrictive policies are implemented and supranational institutions are promoting a top-down policy enforcement process, populist parties will increase their power (Crouch, 2004; Ranciere, 2006), exploiting the democratic deficit but seemingly defending an agenda for fostering democracy. In addition, as Canovan (2004) states, the new populists explicitly claim to be genuine democrats, who are seeking to regain power on behalf of the people, but in fact, as Mudde and Kaltwasser

(2013) have underlined, they pose a threat but also a corrective chance for democracy, only if the concerns of the electorate that the populist forces attract are taken seriously into account.

Summarizing, it should be also noted that, although there are crucial differences between the three parties, their main strategies involve significant populist components. Their anti-systemic rhetoric, the criticism of the European institutions, often with harsh terms, the creation of the enemy-friend dipole (internal and external) and the vague nature of the transition from theoretical promises to political practice, are some of their core elements. At the same time though, it should be mentioned that M5S has a more mixed agenda while PODEMOS and SYRIZA, only theoretically, seem to support left-wing positions.

It turns out that in the midst of the economic crisis in Southern Europe, populism, mainly of the left wing, has been in a direct increase as long as it can attract more voters in Spain and Greece. In Italy the mixed agenda of M5S aims to attract left and right-wing discontent and dissatisfied voters. In all three cases though, the pressure of youth and general unemployment, poverty, disappointment for politics and the fear of the future, offered more than ever, lucrative ground for a policy characterized by simplified slogans, emotions and fuelled resentments (Mavrozacharakis, Kotroyannos & Tzagkarakis, 2017). Under these circumstances, as it is evidenced by surveys in the voters of these parties (Segatti & Capuzzi, 2016), they mainly attract those who are facing labour market integration problems and have suffered socio-economically.

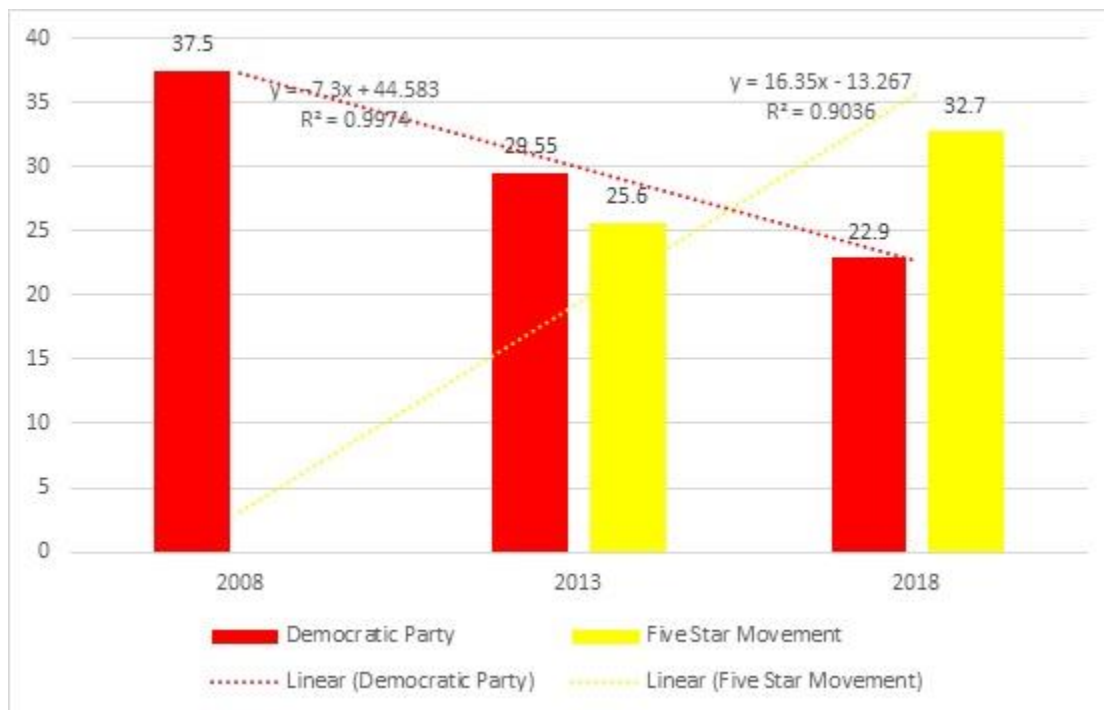
Last but not least, a common feature of all these parties is their rise time, as it can be directly linked with the outbreak of the economic crisis, the general philosophy of austerity measures in Southern Europe, and the decline of traditional parties and especially of the Social-Democratic (Bosco & Verney, 2012). The electoral data show a significant relation between the electoral increases of the three under study parties with the social-democratic parties' electoral collapse-pasokification (see Figures 2, 3, 4).



**Source:** Greek Ministry of Interior, Available at: <http://www.ypes.gr/el/Elections/NationalElections/Results/> (Accessed: 11/03/2018), own calculations.

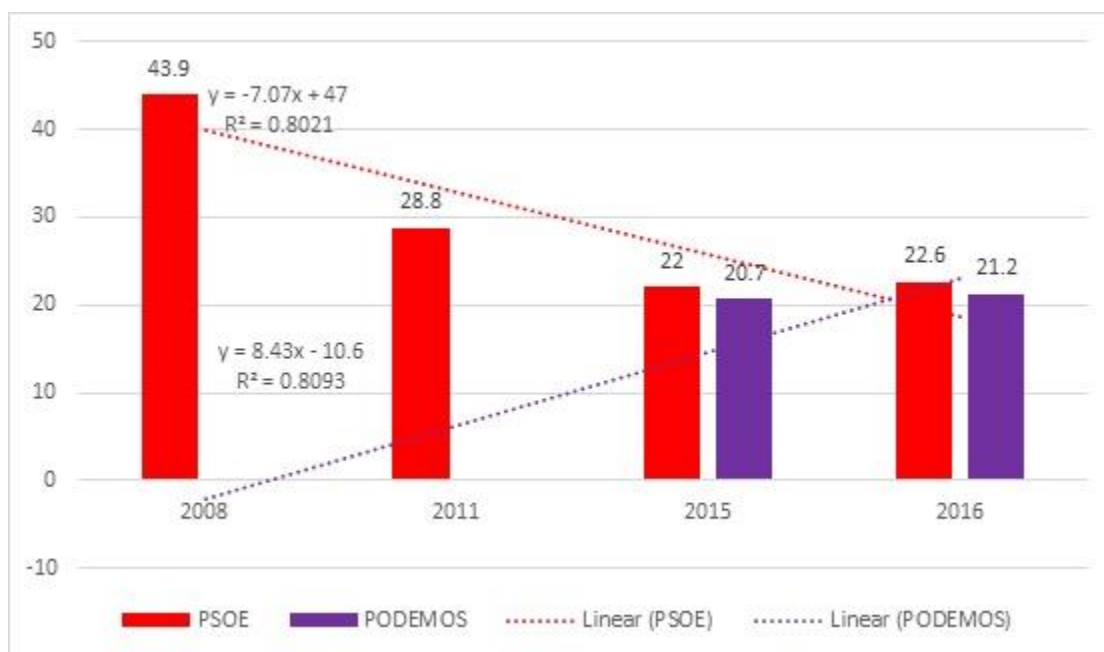
**Figure 2.**  
SYRIZA's electoral rise and PASOK's collapse.





Source: Italian Ministry of Interior, Available at: <http://www.infoelettoral.mir.es/infoelettoral/min/> (Accessed: 10/03/2018), own calculations.

**Figure 3.**  
M5S electoral rise and Democratic Party's decline



Source: Spanish Ministry of Interior, Available at: <http://www.infoelettoral.mir.es/infoelettoral/min/> (Accessed: 10/03/2018), own calculations.

**Figure 4.**  
PODEMOS's electoral rise and PSOE's decline



It should be also mentioned that the tradition-culture of social-democracy in these countries has a relatively poor character in compare with the Central and North Europe, as a result of the late industrialisation and democratisation. Thus, the social-democratic parties that were formed in Greece, Spain and Italy, except their relatively late construction, lacked of social references, namely of a vast and comprehensive labour class that traditionally supported such parties in North and Central Europe. Exactly for this reason, these parties, as it is clear in the above figures, lost their electoral power in the first crisis that occurred. This explains why the under study populist parties have as a strategic objective the dissolution of the social-democratic parties as long they are aware that this is the main way to improve their electoral influence.

Thus, it is no coincidence that electoral confrontations are dense, governments are weakened and the majorities are relative and almost always cooperative. This leads us to the conclusion that we are talking about a particular South European model of electoral crisis processes, the phenomena of populism are intense and the new political elites derive momentum from the movements and anti-European rhetoric (Verney & Bosco, 2013).

The main challenge that remains and is connected with the rise of populism in Southern Europe is the way that can repair democracy but not undermine it. It will be a threat if the division between the European core and the periphery as well as the exacerbated social problems, remain. On the other hand, even if this is difficult now than ever, there is a challenge to confront these problems under a European perspective in a way that will foster democracy and social cohesion. But this can become reality only if populism is substituted by real policy implementation based on real needs and problems of the society and not on the political interest of the populists.

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